

# Practical Research Work in Photoplay Writing

*By* ADELINE M. ALVORD





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*One of a Series of Lectures Especially  
Prepared for Student-Members  
of The Palmer Plan*



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ADELINE M. ALVORD

ADELINE M. ALVORD is an advanced student of drama, having been identified with educational dramatics and professional work for many years. While in college she made a reputation as a dramatic reader and a student of dramatic construction. In 1913 she took up her residence on the Pacific Coast and established a studio of dramatic art in Portland, Oregon. In such connection she surrounded herself with much talent, including Lord and Lady Aberdeen, Marie Meyer, famous through her work at Oberammergau, and many others. During this period she was affiliated with the J. B. Pond Lyceum Bureau of New York, and was considered one of the most successful Shakespearean coaches in the West. Not satisfied that her knowledge and reputation were sufficient, she continued her studies, working during the summer months under such men as Winnens of Cornell and U. B. Sufton Holdorne of Oxford at the University of California. When the war necessitated the closing of many private schools in every line of art, Mrs. Alvord moved to Los Angeles and became interested in motion picture production. Her knowledge of dramatic literature, technique and values soon won for her recognition, and she accepted a position in the scenario department at the Metro Studios, where she made rapid advancement in her work until finally she was given full charge of the Research Department of that organization. Recognizing her value, the Palmer Photoplay Corporation engaged her to organize its Department of Research, and this task she accomplished admirably. The advice contained in the following pages is indicative of the sound quality of common sense that characterizes all of Mrs. Alvord's work.



**I**N the Handbook the discussion of research was omitted, not because Mr. Palmer considered it a non-essential topic, but for the reason that its relative value and comparative importance in the usually accepted sense has been more concerned with the production of a motion picture than in the construction of the story. Most studios now maintain Research Departments wherein experts obtain authentic data covering the details of customs, costumes, implements, architecture and furniture of various periods and places.

2. It is a fact that would be hilariously laughable, were it not lamentable, that until recently, and occasionally even today, glaring and preposterous errors are permitted to creep into film productions, errors that are utterly unnecessary and obviously the direct and natural result of haste, carelessness or indifference. To avoid injustice, let me say that I believe the latter of these reasons to be seldom the cause, for competition is so keen among producers that each is desirous of doing a high quality of work. Haste and carelessness, with misinformation as an added factor, usually underlie the blunders that find their way into the completed film.

3. When Mr. Palmer asked me to write a lecture on the subject of Research I was mildly surprised, for I failed to see just how a specialized branch of studio technique could assist the student of film-story construction. After an open-minded analysis of the matter, however, I concluded that a better quality of work would come from

students if more attention were given to Research right at the beginning; that, instead of proceeding on the basis of "here is the rough idea—let the director do the rest," the writer would better take more time and pains and include necessary details in the original manuscript. This would accomplish more than one useful service; it would assure the presentation of a detailed synopsis more fully complete and thus more acceptable and valuable to the buyer so far as price is concerned, and it would also compel the author to write about what he knows and know whereof he writes, not only in the matter of physical details, but in fine photo-dramatic values as well.

4. What is Research? The definition of the word is distinctly comprehensive: "*Diligent inquiry or examination in seeking facts or principles; laborious or continued search after truth.*" Research, as applied to photoplay writing, means just that, with a very strong emphasis on "*diligent.*" It is diligently seeking out with continued care social customs, manners of dress, architecture, or any details involved in the plot, place or people of a screen story, that may bring the finished work to a point as closely as possible approaching perfection.

5. A story came in some months ago from a student living in Montana. It was conceded by the Advisory Bureau to be an excellent tale in a general way. The action opened in Montana and ended in New York. Fortunately the big situations were laid in Montana, where the author knew exactly what he was talking about. Then the story switched to New York, and it at once became evident that the author was treading on unfamiliar ground. There was an elaborate description of a society scene in a conservatory and some very necessary details involving the wonderful teak-wood in a millionaire's drawing room.

6. This writer was not in the least familiar with con-

servatories or drawing rooms of New York millionaires, and his handling of the subject bordered on the ridiculous. So indispensable were the happenings interwoven through this part of the story, however, that changes could not easily be made. There was a ready market just at that moment for just such a story, but it was necessary to return the manuscript for reconstruction and revision. By the time it came back in its amended form the opportunity for its sale no longer existed.

7. Had the author devoted time and thought to careful *research* before first submitting the manuscript, the return and revision would have been unnecessary and the sale would have been promptly made. Fortunately, this story was sold at a later date, although at a price considerably less than could have been obtained in the first instance. Had the story been submitted direct to a studio and rejected, the author might have never known what prevented the sale, and his time and effort would have been wasted. Frequently just such weakness or carelessness in construction and details ruins the selling prospects of an otherwise good story.

8. On another occasion a story was submitted by a woman writer. The plot involved the mysterious theft of oil from a producing well. The writer not only stated the fact, but described in detail just the manner in which the line was tapped and the oil drained from the well. This woman undoubtedly was not familiar with the workings of an oil line, yet she had taken the trouble to research her material and make this act, which closely involved her plot, very plain and clear. This was a strong point in favor of her story when it came to be considered, and led to its eventual sale. The check that she received more than justified her in the expenditure of the necessary time and mental energy which brought about perfection of detail.

9. Studio research work in its relation to a produc-



tion means not only gathering authentic data, but requires an intimate knowledge of camera effects and the handling of the most minute details of wearing apparel, household furniture and utensils, interior decorations, implements of toil and trade, and a thousand and one other things that are of seemingly little importance, yet the misuse of which may lead to glaring defects in the completed production.

10. In "*The Red Lantern*," one of the feature pictures of 1919, the research required weeks of careful work. Material and data were gathered from many different sources in order that the continuity writer who handled the final version of the working manuscript might be sure of the accuracy of even the smallest item.

11. It is usually unnecessary for the creator of a story to go to such extremes as these employed by the continuity staff, but research has come to play a very important part in the original construction of a story, and should begin before a line is written. Provided the author is equipped with a technique comprising the various fundamental values covered by the Handbook, there is nothing more indispensable in starting to evolve a photoplay plot than the preliminary or contemporaneous "diligent inquiry or examination in seeking facts or principles; laborious or continued search after truth." This serves its chief function by showing the writer what he can use and what he cannot out of the mass of material at hand. He must research to find reasons that can be brought forward and supported sufficiently to warrant the use of his material, reasons based upon inferences made according to the laws of logic.

12. Better qualities of unity, sequence, proportion and co-ordination may be secured by means of careful research, rather than by proceeding hastily and carelessly, as is so regrettably often the case. When one sets forth upon the intricate task of building a photoplay plot, event



upon event, sequence upon sequence, situation upon situation, supplying motive, natural action, well balanced conflict, keeping well within the bounds of the unities until the final climax is reached, one must be as sure of the material in hand as a chemist is of his oxides, carbides and cyanides, else the results will fall short of perfection.

13. Less than a week ago my attention was called to a story, the entire action of which was laid in California. This began in an interesting way and proceeded admirably in every respect until the situation immediately preceding the big climax was reached. The suspense had been well organized and excellently sustained, and I was held completely in the spell of the thing, when—the hero and heroine, seeking to escape from an evil pursuer, were overtaken by a storm. Peering through the trees, they saw the unmistakable conically shaped cloud that denoted an approaching tornado. Fortunately a cyclone cellar was at hand, and they hastily hid in it. This cyclone cellar and its contents were perfectly described. The pursuer was about to enter it, and murder seemed imminent, when a bolt of lightning struck him and he was instantly killed. Had the scene been laid in Kansas, this would not have been at all improbable, but California has neither cyclones nor cyclone cellars in the foothills of the Sierras, and fatal strokes of lightning are so infrequent as to be almost unheard of in the Golden State.

14. Of course this sequence could be replaced by another involving different incidents that would serve just as well, but photoplay editors and producers are seeking stories to *produce*, not to laboriously *revise* and *rewrite*. The author of the story in question had evidently been familiar with cyclone cellars, for he knew exactly how they are built and furnished, but he did not seem to realize that they are unnecessary and unknown in California.

15. Up to this point in the story the craftsmanship

had been splendid, but the sudden involution of the tornado, cyclone cellar and stroke of lightning had the same effect upon the story as a chemist might produce by adding one drop of sulphuric acid to a properly proportioned mixture of chlorate of potassium and sugar. If you are not familiar with the results of such procedure, do not try it unless you are tired of life and have an ample insurance policy for the protection of your heirs and assigns. How do I know what would happen under such circumstances? I did not five minutes ago, but I picked up my telephone and consulted a chemist. *That is research!*

16. Research does not depend upon how much one knows, but rather upon where and how to seek and secure accurate information. A story involving Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr showed an innocent man condemned to death. There was one friend who, if he could be reached with a message, could intervene and save the innocent life. The condemned man asked permission to send a farewell token to this friend. Turning back into his cell, he secured a self-filling fountain pen, which he had secreted. The pen was empty, through long disuse. Cutting a gash in his arm, he filled the pen with his own blood, wrote a note on a small scrap of paper, hid it in the cap of the pen, and dispatched the gift by the messenger. The friend received the pen, found the note in the cap, and immediately took steps that resulted in the freedom of the condemned and the apprehension of the person who was really guilty.

17. All very well, and quite effective up to the point of realizing that self-filling fountain pens, or any other kind of fountain pens, for that matter, were unheard of during the lifetime of Hamilton and Burr. Had the author substituted a different expedient and saved the fountain pen incident for use in a more modern story, he would have been time and money ahead.

18. In another manuscript I found an excellent

quality of suspense, which depended upon David Crockett making use of the eight bullets in a Colt Automatic. If David Crockett and his associates had providentially been equipped with Colt Automatics, the Alamo would possibly have been saved and history would, of necessity, be rewritten. Neither Colt nor his automatic had come upon the scene in those days, however, all of which would have been readily brought to light had the erring author indulged in a little research.

19. During the past year I have run across such startling things as an electric flash-lamp in the days of Guy Fawkes, an Ingersoll watch carried by a sea captain who was a contemporary of Sir Francis Drake, the theft of unmounted diamonds by means of a magnet suspended upon a string, the election of a Supreme Court Justice by popular vote, a pioneer in the Gold Rush of '49 using a safety razor, and enough other "bulls" and blunders to make one wonder why books of reference exist, if not to be used. Some of these examples are so ridiculous as to sound utterly improbable. Fortunately such flaws in otherwise well constructed photoplay plots are seldom so extreme, but in whatever degree they may exist they are unforgivable and unnecessary. In the photoplay we are reflecting life, and why not "diligently inquire into and examine the facts and principles" in order that the great realities of life may not be made to appear unreal by their mode of presentation. Do not permit yourself to be persuaded that producers of photoplays want nothing but speed and punch. Unless there be truth, sincerity and reality, all other requisites are futile.

20. There are many details and circumstances with which the average person is not expected to be fully familiar. One may know little or nothing of court procedure, but it is not usually difficult to obtain information from some attorney or court attache. One may desire to deal with an incident in which the action of a certain poison must be demonstrated. No great effort is required

to question a physician or pharmacist, in order to acquire specific advice. In fact, one may have lived in seclusion and be possessed of a minimum of general information, and be possessed of not a single volume of reference, yet research every smallest item of a story elaborately and completely by consulting persons possessed of special sorts of knowledge or libraries containing books dealing with the accumulated knowledge of the ages. A little time, a little patience, a little mental energy—these are necessary if you expect to attain the fame and fortune that await the successful photoplaywright. Yet what joy there is in every bit of the work necessary to achieve these things!

21. If you are not willing to thus carefully research your material and your own mind, then let me say to you, do one of two things: either work until you can or quit the business of writing. Edwin Booth once spent five hours in his hotel room pacing the floor and repeating Nathan's charge to David, "Thou art the man," in every tone, cadence and shade of expression of which he was master, until an occupant of an adjoining room went down and reported that there was a crazy man upstairs, but it was to just such insanity that Edwin Booth owed the secret of his success. What was this but research? Would that such insanity were contagious among young writers—the insanity of preparation, the craze for research. Edwin Booth was a genius, you say. True, and Daniel Webster said, "I know of no genius but the genius of careful, hard work."

22. When Benjamin Disraeli made his maiden speech in the British Parliament his halting effort was jeered and he was laughed at. "I will sit down now," he said, "but the time will come when you shall hear me," and the time did come when the voice of Lord Beaconsfield, England's first statesman, was listened to not only in England's Parliament Halls, but all over the world. In the first instance, Disraeli was not *prepared* for the effort that he made, but his "diligent inquiry and examination in

seeking facts and principles" made him one of the great men of his time.

23. The same principles are as applicable to the growth and progress of a photoplaywright as to the making of a statesman. "In every realm of art the genius of inspiration is in itself inadequate without the training and discipline which enables it to perfectly express itself." Easily fifty per cent of the stories that fail, either as printed fiction or as photoplays, do so because the searchlight of research has not been turned upon the one big idea aimed at, and the necessary auxiliary details. Many a meandering story gives an editor the impression that the author has aimed at nothing—and hit it. Careful research would, in most cases, strengthen the weaknesses and eliminate the errors that render the story unsalable.

24. In some ways, I pity you who are just entering upon your careers, but mostly my feeling is one of envy. Successful writing is bound to include some hard knocks, and while you remain unacknowledged you may look at others who are more successful and say, "Why is it—what keeps me back?" You will despair and bite your lips to keep back the tears, or, if you are a man, to keep back something more forceful, if not so fine, and declare that it is only influence and money that get writers on in the world, but let me assure you that during those struggling moments nothing will be keeping you back. You are going forward the whole time, but you do not realize it because the progress is gradual. The first hill may appear to be terribly steep, and the climb long and hard, but when you get to the top the atmosphere begins to clear amazingly.

25. There are still other hills ahead of you, but after the first one your courage rises tremendously and you sometimes scale the succeeding heights in a surprisingly short time. Perhaps the worst thing that can happen to you is to get a lift up that first hill and scale the top with too little effort. The backbone of experience and the

courage of obstacles overcome is invaluable. The first hill of success is hardest to climb and each succeeding one is easier, but all the struggle and work, the careful application and the diligent effort is so well worth while that no one should whine or whimper one little bit.

26. You may be tired and discouraged at first, but you will soon get over that when you find that the final fruits of your efforts are in demand—that discerning men are eager to pay for the stories that have cost you so much study and work and research. Yet while the money is very welcome and frequently very, very necessary, while the “feel” of fame gladdens the heart and quickens the pulse—after all it is the joy of creating—the magic of imagining characters and visualizing situations and climaxes—that is the superlative possession of the playwright.

27. And now, in closing, as preachers and after-dinner speechmakers are wont to say, let us go way down to the foundation of the whole matter—your text books and your own mind. Research them frequently and thoroughly. Review the Handbook and the Plot Encyclopedia at intervals. Examine your fund of knowledge and satisfy yourself that you are sure of the various points that have been set forth for your perusal and mental progress. Do not take too much for granted. Do not allow yourself to assume that you know things that you really do not know. Do not be superficial. Research is diametrically opposed to superficiality. The man or woman who persists in research is the genuine student who is bound to succeed in spite of every obstacle and every handicap. It is cock-sure carelessness that leads to failure.

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